

EFL Teenagers' Social Identity Representation in a Virtual Learning Community on Facebook

Representación de la identidad social de los estudiantes adolescentes de inglés como lengua extranjera en una comunidad de aprendizaje virtual en Facebook

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In this article I report the findings of a descriptive and interpretative qualitative study carried out in a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. The study aimed at analyzing, describing and exploring teenage students' social identity representation as observed in their participation in a learning community on Facebook. Data were collected from eight active participants through artifacts and semi-structured interviews in the Dragster Virtual Community on Facebook. Data analysis illustrated that teenagers' ways of expressing themselves are manifested in conversations and posts and these interactions portray and reflect their social identity inside the group. Their social representations are evaluated, accepted, or denied by the other members in the asynchronous group.

Key words: Dialogical representation, social identity, virtual community.

En este artículo reportamos los resultados de un estudio cualitativo, descriptivo e interpretativo llevado a cabo en una escuela pública en Bogotá, Colombia. El objetivo fue analizar, describir y explorar la representación de la identidad social de los estudiantes adolescentes de inglés como lengua extranjera, observando su participación en una comunidad de aprendizaje en Facebook. Los datos de ocho participantes activos fueron recolectados a través de artefactos y entrevistas semi-estructuradas en la comunidad virtual Dragster, en Facebook. El análisis de los datos muestra que las expresiones que los adolescentes usan en las conversaciones y en los diferentes tipos de publicaciones reflejan su identidad social dentro del grupo. Sus representaciones sociales son evaluadas, aceptadas o rechazadas por los demás miembros del grupo asincrónico.

Palabras clave: comunidad virtual, identidad social, representación dialógica.

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Introduction

Today the Internet has created new habits of communication, such as e-mail, chats, posts, and pokes, all of which happen to be popular among young people. Studies carried out by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) and the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), revealed that approximately 87 percent of youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen are online. In addition, youth are engaging with social network sites on the Internet, which means that any English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teenage “student with access to an Internet-ready computer and a basic knowledge of how the internet works can post ideas and information which they consider important and build their own interest groups and networks, and many do” (Castells, 2001, p. 157).

For that reason, the intention of this article is to describe the findings in a research report as regards how teenage EFL students portrayed their social identity in a virtual group. Using Facebook as a virtual learning community, the EFL teacher-researcher guided students in the development of activities that allowed them to portray their social identity in the group. To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research question was posed: How do EFL teenage students represent their social identity in a virtual learning community?

In the next sections, the two main constructs for developing this study, its context and participants, as well as the method and data analysis procedures, will be discussed. Moreover, findings about teenagers' social identity will be presented. Finally, the conclusions and pedagogical implications will be discussed.

Literature Review

The study was based on the following two constructs: social identity and virtual communities.

These constructs concern the object of this study: EFL teenage students' social identity representation in a virtual learning community.

Social Identity

Social identity is understood as the way EFL students portray themselves as real people through interactions; for example, using postings and chatting for exchanging ideas about themselves in their foreign language, as well as for recognizing other members in a group. Also, it allows them to represent and negotiate their social presence with other participants in a virtual community.

The definition of social identity that best suits the aim in this study is the one proposed by Palloff and Pratt (2007), who state that the representation of a social identity requires that the members develop social presence in the online community, that is, “the ability to portray oneself as a real person” (p. 43) and to perceive the same in the other members of the group. In addition to that, Palloff and Pratt propose that when people step through the screen into virtual communities, they re-construct their identities on the other side of the looking glass. This reflection projects ourselves “socially and emotionally in a community” (Garrison & Anderson, 2005) and expresses the “self uniqueness”, which allows acceptance and support within the group (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 26).

Virtual Community

Virtual community is understood as a functional virtual space in which learners and teachers share common practices and interests, as well as provide an environment where they identify and represent themselves. This atmosphere must allow participants to work, either asynchronously or synchronously, guided by the teacher in making the learning community a vehicle through which EFL learning occurs online.

For the purpose of this study, a virtual community is understood as a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people shares common practices. Also, the group is inter-dependent, which means they make decisions together and identify themselves with something larger than the sum of their individual relationships inside the group. The members make long-term commitments to their own well-being, as well as one another's and the group's (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). The virtual community offers social communication, an essential component in the educational process. Considering that schools and campuses provide places for students to congregate socially, Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff (1996) state that an online educational environment should provide a space for informal discourse, such as a virtual café, forums, or a group chat. These practices allow the members of the group to forge their social bonds and create important socio-affective and cognitive benefits for the learning activities (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Context

This study was developed at a public school in the Lusitania neighborhood of Bogotá, Colombia. The public school there has been serving a male population of high school students (from grades 6 to 11) for 73 years. The school's Pedagogical Institutional Project (PEI) aims at preparing students through an educational, dynamic, significant, motivating, and innovating environment that provides students with opportunities for intellectual, social, and personal development in society (Colegio Nacional Nicolás Esguerra, 2011).

The School's PEI emphasizes students' identification as social human beings. Hence, the school acts as a mediator in the process of preparing students in social, cultural, political, humanistic, and scientific fields for future opportunities. On this basis, students must learn languages, cultures,

and different kinds of knowledge in order to be successful.

Moreover, the school provides students with a three-hour English class per week; an English book is required for the class, as well as some extra materials. Every classroom has 35 to 40 students. Each grade has an English language teacher who guides the students for two years. For example, there is a teacher for sixth and seventh grades, another for eighth and ninth, and a third for tenth and eleventh grades.

Dragster Virtual Community (vc) was the space chosen to provide opportunities for EFL students to engage in different language learning experiences online. This experience implied interacting with each other through posts and group chats. This virtual community took place on Facebook where students followed Dragster Virtual Community's page and took part in a group called NETS (Nicolás Esguerra Teenage Students). This was an asynchronous environment that allowed participants to log on to the class, its discussions, activities, and chats at any time, to think about what was being discussed and post their own responses with a deadline for doing so. Also, it allowed the teacher to work with a large group of students.

Facebook allowed posting links and activities visually appealing for students and which motivate them to participate in the community. Therefore, virtual learning environments have an advantage over traditional learning environments which is that each student can participate equally in class discussion and different activities.

In this study, I was a teacher-researcher whose attention focused on my students' social identity representation in a learning community on Facebook. I posted a variety of activities such as links, games, videos, listening exercises, among others every single week. These activities were planned, selected, organized and designed in advance for the

development of the course, as well as for gathering data about my area of study.

Moreover, as a facilitator, I provided students with feedback about the activities that were developed offering open communication via private or public messages. I replied to my students' doubts and inquiries about any issue presented in our virtual community. I also promoted a friendly social learning environment and regulated what happened through mediation among the students, rulemaking and decision-making in our group. All in all, I treated all of my students with respect and fostered a warm and enjoyable class environment where we could have fun and learn together.

Participants

The school had five groups of tenth graders. This project was carried out with only 25 students from tenth-three (10-03) who were between 14 and 16 years old. There were thirty (30) male students in the EFL class and twenty-five of them (25) agreed to participate as members in the project. However, only eight students fit the participants' profile.

These eight students were considered participants in this research, in view of the following features: First, the tenth graders could express themselves and their points of view in English. Second, all participants had access to the Internet for four to eight hours per week, developing a "sense of membership" (Riley, 2007, p. 113). Consequently, they would be able to contribute to their own learning process and be able to develop the activities offered.

Method

This study was carried out as a descriptive and interpretative qualitative research study which, according to Burns (2005), is focused on concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to particular social groups or in communities. In this case, the EFL students got involved and actively took part,

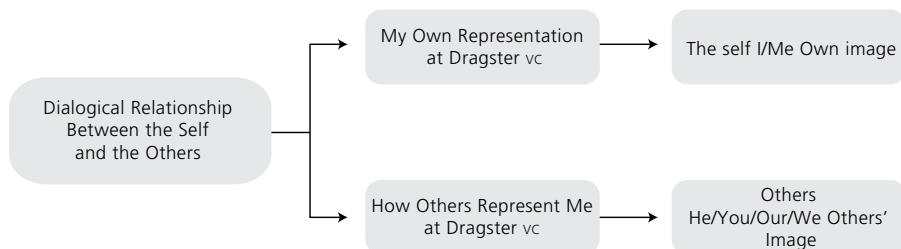
developing different activities that allowed them to portray their social identity through "typing, writing, image manipulation, creation of avatars, digital video and audio" (Hine, 2000, p. 70) in the Dragster Virtual Community on Facebook.

This study considers the Internet an open context tool for social interactions where practices, meanings, and identities are intermingled (Domínguez, Beaulieu, Estalella, Gómez, Schnettler, & Read, 2007). That is why this study attempted to create a learning group in which learners would be able to interact with each other, either through posts on the Community' wall, open discussions, or group chats. The idea of developing a learning community on Facebook was developed from these criteria, and Dragster vc was created as an available space on the Internet that would contribute to the purpose of this research.

Data Collection

Data were collected in the first academic semester (February-June) of 2011 and gathered through students' artifacts posted in the virtual community on Facebook and through semi-structured interviews. These instruments were important in this study because students' artifacts would show EFL students' social identity representation. Their identities were developed and evidenced in their written narrative about themselves and the other members. Subsequently, the semi-structured interviews would be used to validate the data presented by the learners' artifacts.

Students' artifacts contained illustrations that students used for expressing their social identities through online hypertexts in visual and written form, as well as their interactions in the group. The purpose of this instrument was based on Burns' (2005) idea that students' artifacts would allow the teacher-researcher to have a clearer picture of the students' reactions, perceptions, reflections, and

Figure 1. Core Category and Subcategories

thoughts. Moreover, this instrument was employed to make a detailed portrayal of students' social identity, in addition to "provid[ing] an easy way of obtaining other people's perceptions" (Hopkins, 2002, p. 145).

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were used because they were an opportunity to explore participants' social identities and develop ideas about how those identities are presented, as well as confirming information gathered with students' artifacts. According to Freeman and Capper (1999), an interview is a structured oral (or possibly written) exchange with someone that aims at gathering information. The interview is more comfortable and rewarding for the researcher and the interviewer and is appropriate because it is open-ended and thus more flexible (Burns, 2005). Semi-structured interviews permitted students to conduct a dialogue about their thoughts and conceptions of their own pieces of work and other members' work.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis of the data was done under the principles of grounded theory that, according to Dey (1999, pp. 1-2), purports to discover or generate theory. Also, it allows the researcher to have a conversation with the data, ask questions of them, and make comments to them, as well as continuously compare incidents and respondents' remarks (Merriam, 1998).

The data were compared and contrasted and then grouped into patterns using different colors and key words for each of the patterns. After reading the patterns several times, one core category emerged named "Dialogical Relationship Between the Self and the Others" (see Figure 1). This category helped the researcher understand how participants shared and negotiated their social identities through dialogue. As shown in Figure 1, the data were classified into two sub-categories: "My Own Representation at Dragster VC" and "How Others Represent me at Dragster VC", which support the main core category. Identity is used to refer to a sense of integration of the self, in which different aspects come together in a unified whole (Deaux & Philogène, 2001).

Findings

Dialogue was fundamental in the description of teenagers' social identity in the virtual community. Their ways of expressions are manifested in conversations that portray and reflect their social identity inside the group, based on their pre-existing self, which means that "representations are constitutive of reality" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 145). Therefore, the speaker identity is expressed by all "communicative practices" (Riley, 2007, p. 93) that are developed among other members in a community. This category evidences the relationship of "how I want others to see me", "how others see me", and the incorporation participants had in

relation to the group throughout their communication in Dragster Virtual Community. Their social identities were represented “appropriately through the acquisition of certain practices, particularly those involved in taking and assigning responsibility” (Riley, 2007, p. 84) in Dragster vc. The analysis showed that participants were able to portray their social identity during the dialogical relationships that were created among members of the virtual community. Consequently, they would become involved in most activities proposed, such as posts, comments, e-activities, chatting, pictures, and tags, among others. These types of activities allowed the EFL learners to become active participants inside the community.

The communicative practices that emerged from their actions inside the group permitted participants to reflect on their own representation and generate a public image that would be recognized by the other members of the group. In addition, their social identity must be understood with reference to social structures, which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction where the role of the EFL language is seen as a fundamental aspect of a language learner’s social identity (Heller, as cited in Norton, 1997).

My Own Representation at Dragster VC

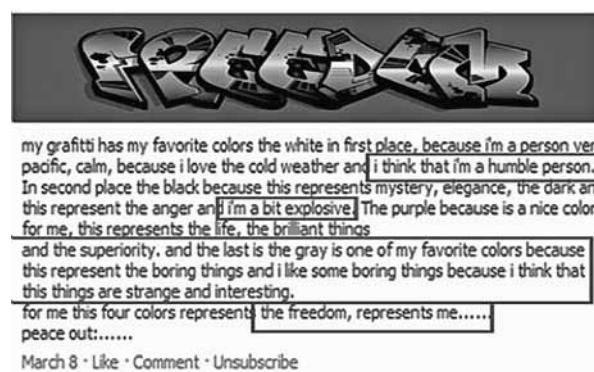
Duff and Uchida (1997, as cited in Hinkel, 2011) affirmed that social identity is co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on a regular basis through language. Thus, the EFL participants portrayed themselves via pictures and comments using their foreign language, including the use of “I/me” for exposing themselves in the virtual community. For example, students were asked to create their own graffiti using a word that represented themselves via an application in a website called graffiticreator.com. Consequently, the students came up with a reflec-

tion of their self-image that was socially defined and negotiated by “the choices the writers make in their discourses” (Hyland, 2002, p. 65).

Using graffiti and making a comment about it was an exercise that allowed students to express their “uniqueness as a person” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 201) because they were able to employ their favorite colors and their own words to portray themselves. Subsequently, the learners illustrated their own voice, showing their “distinctive signature, the individual stamp that they leave on a text” (Hyland, 2002, p. 70).

Those unique or idiosyncratic self-understandings presented in their narratives illustrated their “individual identity” and “self-conceptions” (Ashmore, 1997, p. 120) about themselves as individuals in the community. As observed, participants made a variety of graffiti and narratives that showed each individual’s particular characteristics. For instance, Brayan CB reflected his self-image differently from the other participants in the virtual community, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Brayan CB’s Graffiti Representation



The student used the word “Freedom” and expressed his “love for cold weather” and “weird stuff” with the color gray. Brayan CB described himself saying, “I think that I’m a humble person” and “I’m a bit explosive” which was affirmed by

most of the participants in the semi-structured interviews (March 18, 2011, line 34). We can see how "I" is employed to portray the active, creative agent doing the experiencing, thinking, and acting in the learning community (Ashmore, 1997).

Brayan CB was also interested in "boring activities" because he mentioned, "these things are strange and interesting". He meant that he had a strange love for all the activities a typical teenager of his age would hate to do. He explained that those "boring activities" were going to a museum or art exhibit, reading a historic book, watching an independent movie, and dating a boy, instead of a girl. These activities are unusual for the teenagers participating in the study. According to a semi-structured interview, most enjoy playing musical instruments, playing a sport or a video game, listening to music, watching television, or going out with friends.

Learners have different interests in relation to other members in the learning community. However, the participants always interacted and looked for those learners who represented a social identity similar to their own selves. This may be because their attention is aimed at the same goal, "engagement in both the classroom and the wider target language community" (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

In the graffiti by Bravy (see Figure 3), the student portrayed himself as "funny" because of his jokes and his positive personality. He described himself as a happy person that smiles all the time. Hence, the EFL students' self-idea "seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance (how he perceived himself) and some sort of self-feeling such as pride or mortification" (Cooley, 1964, as cited in Riley, 2007).

Figure 3. Bravy's Graffiti Narrative



Students portray themselves with unique characteristics different from other members of the group. First, the imagination of the teenagers' appearance to the other members in Dragster was represented through their own imaginations by using profile pictures, either of themselves or their favorite artists, as well as creating fictional names for the virtual community. Their names were asked to be distinctive and to represent something they identified with. For example, we could see in the excerpt below that Bravy had a photo of Cristiano Ronaldo as his profile picture. According to him, this soccer player was his favorite sportsman. Also, he said "Cristiano looked just like me when we are playing on the field" and he was using his picture to support him during the Champions League Cup final that was being played in Europe at that time (Interview, March 24, line 23). In this case, one notices how "me" is the perspective or "attitude" toward oneself that one assumes when taking the role of a specific person or the generalized community (Ashmore, 1997). Therefore, the other participants corroborated that Bravy was interested in playing soccer and had similar physical characteristics to Ronaldo's.

As Boone, Gordon-Larsen, Adair, and Popkin (2007) state, people influence their environment by

characteristics they naturally possess; in this case, Cristiano Ronaldo's ability to play soccer influenced Bravy's physical appearance in our virtual community. Knowing that Bravy was good at soccer, he consequently portrayed himself with a picture of who he considered "the best" at playing this sport and followed him as a sport role model. This argument demonstrates that natural characteristics are one of the factors EFL students' used in order to represent their social identity. Teenagers reflected their own self-perceived image; they represented themselves by how they wanted to be seen and recognized by the other members at Dragster vc. However, if they did not interact with other participants, their social identity would not be acknowledged and visible by the participants inside the virtual "group they belonged to" (Tajfel, 2010, p. 225).

On the other hand, the imagination of participants' judgment of their partners' appearance is portrayed by the comments students made to each other. Consequently, a dialogical interaction emerged and these interactions allowed me to see how the participants were perceived and seen inside Dragster vc. As seen in the pictures shown in Figure 4, Bravy made his avatar look just like him.

Figure 4. Bravy's Avatar vs. His Profile Picture on Facebook



However, most of his partners questioned his interest in "CHE", who was stamped on his avatar's t-shirt. He had not given any significance to this social character when the group first began. When Bravy was asked, he said he was using the "Che" icon on his t-shirt to let other members in our group know that he admired him. On the contrary, Brayan CB said, "I don't think he even knows who the 'Che' really was or what ideals he pursued". Brayan CB considered that the "Che" did not adapt to the identity Bravy had been shaping in our group.

People can imaginatively anticipate others' evaluations of their identities and identity performances (Ashmore, 1997), as shown in Figure 4. EFL students portrayed their image of themselves in our learning community and this image was evaluated and either rejected or accepted by the others. Hence, appearance affects both the way we look at other people and the way we look at ourselves. As Boone et al. proposed (2007), appearance is genetically determined and therefore independent of personality. In other words, EFL students' physical appearances affected the Dragster vc environment given that it was the space in which they were involved.

To sum up, how we know ourselves is basically the same as how we know others, and it depends on observation, retrospection, and projection (Jenkins, 2008). When teenagers belong to a virtual community, they examine who they are. Then, they recognize how they want to be seen by others, and lastly, they show others how they want to be identified via dialogues, pictures, comments, and posts, among other virtual forms of expressions. "My Own Representation at Dragster vc" described how participants portrayed themselves using words that make them stand out from others.

¹ Che Guevara was one of the greatest Marxist revolutionaries in Latin American history. The Che symbol represents a countercultural rebellion and he is recognized for his pursuit of the transformation of the endemic poverty and alienation he witnessed.

They represented their identity with "what makes individuals just that, individual" (Riley, 2007, p. 87).

Others' Representation at Dragster VC

Social identity is a quality that is attributed to an "individual human being by other human beings" (Riley, 2007, p. 86). This means we need other people to tell us who we are and it is through interactions that people are able to portray themselves and create an image of others in a virtual community here. While involved in a community, it is our appearance in it that affects others' opinions and influences how others perceive us.

Figure 5 illustrated the interaction between two students having a conversation about a song. This song was suggested by one of them in our group chat. It is called "Pretty Eyes" by Alex Goot. Cortes expressed his dislike for the song, affirming, "I do not like ¬¬" using this "¬¬" eye emotion to express his aversion to the song. Also, this symbol "¬¬" denoted that he found this particular song not worth hearing or watching, considering that an emoticon expresses the writer's emotions using icons thus giving more meaning to plain text.

Figure 5. Some Students' Reactions to Others' Comments

The screenshot shows a Facebook post from a group named 'Dragster Vc'. The post includes a video thumbnail for 'Pretty Eyes' by Alex Goot, with the caption: 'Listen to this awesome song!!! It is super cute!! Hope you like it!! :P'. Below the video, there are several comments from group members:

- A comment from 'Andres Sarmiento and Brayan Cardenas Baron' with a timestamp of 'about a month ago' and a link to the video.
- A comment from 'Brayan Cardenas Baron' with a timestamp of 'April 4 at 3:04pm' and a reply from 'alex goot^'^.
- A comment from 'Gabriel Cortes' with a timestamp of 'April 4 at 6:39pm' and a reply from 'Dragster Vc'.
- A comment from 'Brayan Cardenas Baron' with a timestamp of 'April 6 at 1:00am' and a reply from 'Dragster Vc'.

In response, Brayan CB replied using a different emoticon "I.", which literally means giving the middle finger to someone, to state his opinion about the song "Pretty Eyes". Also, he added: "This song is for people with good taste". This statement showed how Brayan CB perceived Cortes as a teenager that did not have musical appreciation. It also let the other students know how Cortes was recognized by him, showing other members in the group that they did not share their point of view about music. In other words, music appreciation was seen as different means of instrumentation, rhythm, lyrics and vocal styles that expressed EFL students' social identity. "These themes are reflected in the music not only lyrically, but through its instrumental composition and the social settings with which it is associated" (Strickland & Capodilupo, 2002). Also, music tended to express defiance towards the opposite sex or feelings of romance, love, and sex, among others, as we could see in the previous example. Brayan CB exposed his focus on romantic music with his "The desire to be loved, as well as the activity of raging hormones" in this stage of his life. This is in contrast to Cortes who enjoyed defiant music such as rock, metal, and punk that reflected the "rejection of parental control" at home (Strickland & Capodilupo, 2002).

Interactions took place and comments about an issue were made by students and these comments established how other members portrayed others' identities –in this case, about a song– and how through the comments they generated an image about the other. The self is social in its entirety and it is only from the study of social relations that one can truly understand how individuals are social selves and how their social life is the source of development of individuality in a social context (Burkitt, 1991). When participants illustrated their likes, dislikes, opinions, agreements, disagreements, emotions, and feelings through dialogical

communication with the others in our group, the students were reflecting their social selves and showing in those interactions their real persons (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

The students had the possibility of judging whether the representation of a participant was accurate to himself or not due to their interactions in the classroom and in our virtual community. In other words, if they wanted to be accepted, they must represent themselves according to the “real person” inside the online environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 4). For example, students were asked to create their avatar and make it as similar to them as possible using an application called Mego Dev that allowed them to characterize their physical appearance and outfits.

This exercise let students expose how they wanted to be characterized in the virtual community. It also gave the students the choice to accept or deny that representation according to their own perceptions about other members. When they step through the screen into virtual communities, they re-portray their identities on the other side of the looking glass. This re-portrayal was their cultural work in progress and the Internet was another element of the computer culture that contributed to thinking about “identity as multiplicity” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 92).

The fear of social rejection was very much alive among the participants, as can be seen in the example shown in Figure 6. If students did not share appreciation for the musical band “Slipknot”, those students would not have other members’ acceptance. However, a “like” for a musical band did not assure the others’ approval, as is illustrated on Zebaztian’s post. His post made evident how he perceived the other participants’ social identity in our group when he expressed his point of view about the others affirming: “Howrah aghhh everybody likes slipknot and just doing it for fashion and nothing but claw”.

Figure 6. Social Rejection of the Others

Zebaztian Leon
Howrah aghhh everybody likes slipknot and just doing it for fashion and nothing but claw
about 2 months ago • Like • Comment • Unsubscribe

Brayan Cardenas Baron likes this.

Zebaztian Leon J.
March 4 at 7:13pm • Like

Dragster Vc why do you say that??
March 4 at 7:22pm • Like

Feli-p Gaitan no t true we rock we do for fashion but because we like
March 4 at 7:22pm • Unlike • 1 person

Zebaztian Leon that one person you started to like the course and now everyone heard slipknot and most funny thing is that it is not rock
March 4 at 7:25pm • Unlike • 2 people

Feli-p Gaitan first there are people like me who had already heard the metal and the other, the metal is derived from rock
March 4 at 8:02pm • Like

Feli-p Gaitan don't say anything unless you know what he's talking
March 4 at 8:07pm • Like

Brayan Cardenas Baron It is just the truth in the classroom there are many people without the personality!! that listens to some music bands only for the social acceptance.

The comment showed in Figure 6 created a controversy among the participants. As Polhemus (2000, cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2007) stated, students were able to give their points of view when they used personal forms of address, acknowledgment of others, expressions of feeling and humor, sharing, and the use of textual paralanguage symbols such as emoticons, font colors, different fonts, capitalization, and symbols or characters for expression in their post interventions.

For example, when Zebaztian used the phrase “everybody likes slipknot” in his statement, he was recognizing all the members in the virtual community as well as characterizing them according to their musical taste. Also, he expressed his dislike for this situation, using the word “claw”. “Claw” illustrated how frustrated he was feeling about the members who just liked “Slipknot” because it was a fashionable band at that moment. It was evidenced

² “Claw” was used to express “se dan garra”, a popular expression in Bogotá, Colombia. It is used by teenagers to mean that something is unfortunate, ridiculous and has poor taste.

that their relationships were essential for passing on the lessons and their likes enabled them to join the community and gain others' acceptance. In order to do this properly and efficiently, teenagers learn quickly from their peers, especially those who have more social power, are older, or more popular (Baird, 2010). After his post, he used paralanguage in order to symbolize the middle finger "I." and all its connotations. This sign was intended to challenge the other members to defend themselves from his statement. According to Zebaztian, they just liked Slipknot because of "fashion" and social acceptance in our group.

We can also see how Feli-p reacted to Zebaztian's comment. Feli-p completely disagreed with Zebaztian's statement and wrote: "no true, we like rock and we don't do it for fashion. We do it because we like it" (see Figure 6). How "we" is employed in Feli-p's post showed the way he saw the other participants because he is putting himself in place of the others and is portraying himself as a mediator who represents all the members in the group who liked listening to "Slipknot". This evidences that adolescents have a strong desire to like the same type of music their friends like, and dislike the same type of music their friends dislike (Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2000). Teenagers want to identify themselves with a group and label that group as 'cool', while distancing themselves from another group identified as 'uncool'; having musical taste similar to the in-group and dissimilar to the out-group aids in this association. This indicates that music preference may be determined by its "potential to serve a group differentiation function" (Tarrant, North & Hargreaves, 2002), which means that Dragster had two sub-groups: the one who liked Slipknot, rock, and consequently metal music, and another sub-group who enjoyed listening to other music, such as pop, reggeaton, salsa, and merengue, among others (Semi-structured interview, April 4, 2011).

Subsequently, Zebaztian, Feli-p, and Brayan CB developed a dialogical communication around this particular issue in which each intervened expressing the way they saw others inside the community and how they wanted to be identified. For example, Zebaztian stated, "The fact that one person started to like it in the course and now everybody listened to slipknot and the funniest thing is that it is not rock" (see Figure 6). As can be seen in Figure 6, when Zebaztian used the expression "now everybody heard Slipknot", he was making evident a situation that was happening in Dragster VC that was influencing the participants' taste in music. This situation led to aspects that made them part of the community because "it only needs someone to look at me for me to become what I am" (Riley, 2007, p. 87).

Feli-p was recognized in a different form than what he wanted to reflect himself as in Dragster Virtual Community. He declared: "First, there are people like me who had already listened to Metal and on the other hand, Metal music is derived from rock" (see Figure 6). We could see in the previous comment, how "like me" was employed as a personal form by Feli-p in order to identify his own self and defend his point of view about "Slipknot" by exemplifying his personal experience. Therefore, the central role of language is the relationship between the individual and the social; language not only defines institutional practices, but also serves to represent our sense of self and our "subjectivity" (Weedon, 1987, p. 21).

Then, Brayan CB joined their conversation and added: "It's just the truth in the classroom there are many people without the personality!! that listens to some music bands only for the social acceptance. that stinks!!!" (see Figure 6). Brayan CB supported Zebaztian's comment. He also admitted that "many people"³ enjoyed listening to the musical band

³ It refers to most of the members that take part in Dragster Virtual Community.

“Slipknot” because being accepted in the group offered possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future (Kanno & Norton, 2003) and it fulfilled the impression of management needs; specifically, to please others and to create a particular self-image (Norton, 2000) while involved in a community.

Language allows members to negotiate their sense of self with and across different sites at different points in time and also to gain access to or to be denied access to a group, which gives learners the opportunity to speak up (Norton, 1997).

Conclusions

After the analysis of the data, I can state that the students portrayed their social identity through a dialogical relationship between the self and the others using their foreign language in this interaction. In other words, the teenagers’ social identity representation emerged from communication. Each student reflects himself through pictures, posts, and comments in our learning community, illustrating the way individual learners want other members to see them regarding their own representation.

Teenagers reflected their identity first individually and then collectively, which means they exposed themselves to others and then the other participants decided if they thought the representations students portrayed were accurate. Finally, they decided to accept or to deny membership in the group. Consequently, social identity is reflected when students become part of the group and have a sense of belonging to the community, shown through students’ interaction and how often they log in and participate inside the community.

Students’ active participation allows other members to recognize what manner each of the participants portrays themselves using unique characteristics that make them different from the rest of the group. Students showed these repre-

sentations via profile pictures, photos posted on the group’s wall, narrative posts, comments, and dialogical interactions, among others in the community. Consequently, their portrayals evidenced the students’ social relationships and their “I/me” for denoting their own identity. Students used “you” in order to indicate other members’ identity and the use of “we” to recognize themselves as part of the community. Their interactions allowed teenagers to portray their individual and social selves in the learning community. Therefore, these images were created through dialogical interactions that were evaluated, accepted, or denied by other members in the group.

Pedagogical Implications

This study contributes to the academic community by providing a description of teenagers’ social identities as foreign language learners when using methodologies that allow class and virtual work to become joined or merged. Teachers need to know who their students are and how they represent themselves in a virtual learning community during their language learning processes. The use of narratives in their dialogical interactions allowed me to inquire about participants’ social identities from an academic perspective. Their interactions were used as a tool to motivate participants to portray themselves and recognize other members in the group, thereby exposing their own identities and the identities of others in both oral and written forms.

Moreover, the exploration of social identities in a learning community on Facebook revealed aspects concerning teaching and learning as a foreign language representative of the online process. The role of teachers and classmates in the representation of their social identity was evident through the development of e-activities. Thus, this study encourages teachers to include reflection of

their pedagogical practices. Teachers should be more aware of new theories of language teaching and learning and implement virtual learning communities as an important part in the development of their classes, given that these new techniques are related to students' interests and different learning styles. Being aware of the teaching and learning particularities seems to not be enough. Teachers also have a role in the interactions that occur within the classroom and in the virtual learning space. Teachers should promote the use of virtual spaces because these communities allow students to portray their social identity and at the same time have different experiences as language learners by providing more contact and practice with the foreign language.

This leads to another implication, which has been long been discussed: making the teaching of English meaningful. This implies showing students that English can be used for real purposes, not just as a subject to be studied per se.

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